

EXHIBITION REVIEW

ICONS AT THE CRYPT OF THE SAINT ALEXANDER NEVSKY CATHEDRAL Clemena Antonova

Senior Research Associate
Centre for Patristic and Byzantine Cultural Heritage
Sofia Bulgaria



Figure 1. Saint John of Rila with Scenes of His Life. Early 19th century, anonymous, Tryavna School; Samokov, Bulgaria

Annunciation and major Orthodox saints such as Saints Demetrius and George—we move to typically Bulgarian themes such as the beloved Bulgarian saint Saint John of Rila (c. 876–946) (Figure 1), Saint Petka of Turnovo and Saint Therapontius of Serdica (Sofia). The latter is, in fact, the “Bulgarianized” Saint Therapontius of Sardis. It is not only that Bulgarian saints and subject matter become increasingly prominent in the later period, but several local schools of icon-painting become well-established including Bansko, Samokov and Tryavna.

Among other things, the exhibition at the Crypt in Sofia could be of interest to icon specialists for bringing together a wide array of so-called *vita* or narrative icons. There has been some very exciting research in the last several decades on the type of image that

The National Museum of Bulgarian Fine Arts in the Crypt of Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia, Bulgaria holds the most representative permanent exhibition of icons produced on Bulgarian territory. The vast majority of works belong to the period between the 16th and 19th centuries, but there are also earlier pieces going as far back as the 4th century. There are also sections on 13th–14th century icons and 15th century ones. Clearly, the exhibit aims to be comprehensive and cover the whole period of icon production from Late Antiquity to the Bulgarian National Revival in the 19th century. In many ways, this ambition is realized. The classic beauty of the head of an angel from a fragment from the 4th–5th century, i.e. the time before the foundation of the Bulgarian state (681), is a typical example of the Late Antiquity art produced all across the Mediterranean. It is very different from the Byzantine-looking double icon of *Christ Pantocrator* (11th–12th century) and the *Crucifixion* (14th century) from Nessebar. The latter’s provenance from Nessebar, a town on the Black Sea coast that changed hands between the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarian Kingdom several times, is not surprising.

From subjects that are common to Eastern Orthodox iconography—the Crucifixion, the Last Supper, the

represents the portrait icon of a saint surrounded or flanked by scenes of his/her life.¹ The *vita* format is relatively late. The earliest examples have been tentatively dated to the 9th century. However, the heyday of the *vita* genre in Byzantium was the 12th century, and most of the surviving examples from this period come from the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. At the same time, there are very few surviving narrative images from the capital of Constantinople. Interestingly, it was on the periphery of the Byzantine Empire, in neighboring countries and in places under the strong artistic influence of Byzantium that the format became widespread. It is noteworthy that these “visual biographies of saints,” as Henry Maguire has called them, have had an uninterrupted history and achieved a long-lasting popularity in Italy, the Balkans and Russia from the 13th century onward. The fact that *vita* icons occupy such a significant place at the National Gallery in the Crypt in Sofia bears witness to the success of a pictorial genre that combines what could be seen as two fundamentally different modes of image-making—the iconic and the narrative. One result can be an icon such as the 19th century *Saint John of Rila with Scenes of His Life* (Figure 1). A possible interpretation suggests that the image breaks the opposition between iconic and narrative in that iconic elements have carried onto the *vita* scenes, and vice versa, the narrative mode has impinged on the portrait of the saint in the center.

At the entrance to the Museum, one can buy the exhibition catalogue available both in Bulgarian and English. The quality of the reproductions is high, while the accompanying text gives a very general and quite brief introduction to the exhibition. Bearing in mind the importance of this exhibition, one could reasonably wish for a larger catalog with essays by established specialists in the field, that would provide a more in-depth understanding of various aspects of the art of the icon in Bulgaria.

1 These are some of the most important works in the field: Ševčenko, Nancy, “Vita Icons and ‘Decorated’ Icons of the Komnenian Period” in Davazac, B., (ed.), *Four Icons of the Menil Collection*, (Houston, 1992), pp.55-59 and same author, “The Vita Icon and the Painter as Hagiographer”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 53, 1999, pp.149-167; Hahn, Cynthia, “Icon and Narrative in the Berlin Life of St. Lucy” in Ousterhout, R. and Brubaker, L., (eds.), *The Sacred Image East and West*, (Urbana and Chicago, 1995), pp.72-91; Maguire, H., *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*, (Princeton, 1996); and most recently, Chatterjee, P., *The Living Icon in Byzantium and Italy, 11th – 13th Centuries* (Cambridge, 2014).

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Clemena Antonova



MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS